



Adorned with elaborate carvings, compelling frescoes, tapestries, sculptures and paintings, Oslo City Hall depicts Norwegian history, values and traditions through its art and architecture.

BY ROWDY GEIRSSON

A Grand Design

Oslo City Hall occupies a dramatic position overlooking the waters of Pipervika, the small bay at the head of the Oslofjord around which the core of Norway's capital city has been built. With its twin brick towers and prominent waterfront location, the building has become an icon, both in the local cityscape and upon the international stage—at least on December 10 each year, when the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded within its walls. But beyond this unique prominence, Oslo City Hall also acts in a lesser-known capacity as a brick-and-mortar beacon of homegrown Norwegian art and architecture.

BEYOND A BUILDING

Oslo City Hall's architects, Arnstein Arneberg and Magnus Poulsson, had envisioned a city hall that would capture and convey a sense of Norwegian culture and identity. They wanted to adorn the architecture with works of art that spread across many different mediums. The design and planning for Oslo City Hall followed a precedent set by the city halls of Copenhagen and Stockholm, and the architects of those two buildings (Martin Nyrop and Ragnar Östberg, respectively) both sat on the jury of the architectural competition that awarded Arneberg and Poulsson the project in 1918.

The three city halls share several striking similarities: each dates to the first half of the 20th century, utilizes brick construction, occupies prime real estate where previously existing structures once stood, seeks to be emblematic of the idea of its nation at the time of its design, and is packed with art created by artists from across its country.

Interior of East Gallery (Krohg Room) in Oslo City Hall with frescoes "The City and its Environs" by the Norwegian artist Per Krohg (1889-1965).

However, Oslo City Hall stands apart because of its form. Whereas the Copenhagen and Stockholm City Halls were designed and built in the National Romantic style, with exterior appearances somewhat reminiscent of medieval Italian architecture, the dominant trend in the world of architecture

had shifted by the time of Oslo City Hall's design. Arneberg and Poulsson's plans consequently followed the tenets of Functionalism rather than National Romanticism, and as a result Oslo City Hall possesses a more modernist appearance than either of the two earlier city halls that helped inspire it.

The design and construction of Oslo City Hall spanned a 30-year period in Norway's history. Construction began in 1931, was ready for occupation in 1947 (after a building hiatus during World War II) and was officially inaugurated in 1950 to coincide with the city's 900 year anniversary.

Prior to the outbreak of war and the German occupation of Norway, the city had hosted a competition for the artwork that would adorn its new hall.



The Central Hall's massive walls are ornately decorated with huge murals depicting themes alluding to Norwegian life, history and folklore.

The competition's jury included Arneberg and Poulsson, the director of the Norwegian National Gallery, the leader of the Norwegian Labor Party and the Prime Minister of Norway. The outcome of this competition resulted in the creation of some of Norway's most spectacular 20th century art. The pieces range from sculpture to portraiture to tapestries to large murals, which are present throughout the inside and outside of the building.

ARCHITECTURE MEETS ART

As one approaches Oslo City Hall from the direction of Karl Johans gate (the hugely popular shopping street that cuts through the heart of the city, linking the Royal

Palace to the Central Station), the very first piece of artwork visitors will notice is *Svanefontenen* ("The Swan Fountain") by Dyre Vaa. It's a large bronze and granite sculpture that dominates the exterior courtyard located along the landward, north-facing side of Oslo City Hall. The courtyard is bordered by the building façade on three sides and opens out in the direction of downtown Oslo, welcoming passersby to approach.

In addition to the graceful, spiral-form and waterflow of *Svanefontenen*, the courtyard also hosts Joseph Grimeland's *Oslopiken* ("The Oslo Girl"), which watches over the entire space from its perch high on the façade near the building's roof, directly over the main entrance. Flanking the two wings of the courtyard are a combined total of 16 large, elaborately painted wooden reliefs created by Dagfin Werenskiold.

Known as the *Yggdrasilfrisen* ("The Yggdrasil Frieze," a reference to the ancient world tree in Norse mythology), Werenskiold's reliefs depict many mythological motifs, ranging from Odin astride his eight-legged horse to Thor and his goat-pulled chariot to the coming of Ragnarök, the cataclysmic end of days according to Old Norse thought. Dagfin Werenskiold was the son of Erik Werenskiold, who was one of Norway's most prominent painters in the late 19th century and who, alongside Theodor Kittelsen, helped establish the popular image of trolls as we know them today, thanks to his many illustrations for Asbjørnsen and Moe's collection of Norwegian folktales.

After passing through the courtyard and entering the building through the elegantly carved main doors directly beneath *Oslopiken*, visitors cross a narrow foyer and enter the Central Hall, a large, light-filled, rectangular room with a nearly 70-foot-tall ceiling. As the setting for the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony since 1990 (prior to that, the ceremony took place at the Nobel Institute initially and then at the University of Oslo), the prestigious event space is awe-inspiring,

and large enough to accommodate approximately 1,000 guests.

A STORYBOOK OF NORWEGIAN CULTURE

The Central Hall's massive walls are ornately decorated with huge murals depicting themes alluding to Norwegian life, history and folklore. Coming from the courtyard, the first mural that comes into view is along the southern wall, nearest the water beyond: *Arbeid, Administrasjon, Fest* ("Work, Administration, Festivity") by Henrik Sørensen. The colors of blue and orange prevail in this work, and the multiple scenes that comprise it mix local Oslo history, national Norwegian history and references to Norwegian fairytales. One of Norway's leading 20th century painters, Sørensen also created the mural known as "Dream of Peace" that now resides at the UN Library in Geneva.

The murals on the three remaining walls of the Central Hall were created by Alf Rolfsen and differ from Sørensen's in that they are frescoes, painted directly on the wall surface, whereas Sørensen's mural is painted on wooden boards attached to the wall. The first of Rolfsen's frescoes, *Næringsveiene / ...fra de drivende garn til skogene i øst* ("The Business Roads / ...from the drifting nets to the forest in the east") covers the north wall and is an ode to traditional Norwegian working life that includes depictions of two of the nation's most iconic individuals at the turn of the century: the polar explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, one of Norway's most prominent late-19th-century writers.

Rolfsen's other two frescoes are *St. Hallvard* on the west wall, which illustrates the legend of Hallvard Vebjørnsson—a man who defended a pregnant woman from attack but was killed himself, thus becoming the patron saint of Oslo who has also been featured on the city's seal since the Middle Ages—

Every December, the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded in the Central Hall. Some of the murals on the first floor illustrate the history of Norway during the first part of the 20th century.



Wall fresco "The City and its Environs" by Per Krohg in the Eastern Gallery of Oslo City Hall.

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and *Okkupasjonsfrisen* (“The Occupation Frieze”) on the east wall, which illustrates the horrors of the German occupation during World War II.

Learn more
about Oslo City Hall at
oslo.kommune.no/oslo-city-hall

Additional artwork by other prominent Norwegian artists such as Per Krohg, Aage Storstein, Axel Revold and Willi Midelfart is spread throughout, including other large-scale frescoes in the East and West Galleries, Festival Gallery and Banquet Room. Paintings depict subjects ranging from the Norwegian royal family to scenes of traditional Norwegian life and nature, filling these rooms as well as the other spaces and hallways.

There is even a painting by Edvard Munch, in the Munch Room. Munch had been considered for the creation of a large-scale mural early in the planning phase for Oslo City Hall’s artwork, but his proposal to paint a scene of workers building the actual city hall was never approved nor rejected. He eventually withdrew his piece from consideration before the competition was announced.

Oslo City Hall is also full of handicrafts such as tapestries and custom furnishings, all of which further contribute to the architects’ vision to create an artful, civic building that embraces and portrays Norwegian customs and traditions. 🇳🇴



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